The Dove Came Down

IT WAS a Sabbath morning in the prosperous town. It was midwinter. At the end of each ray of sunlight melted a lump of snow. Down the glassy walks men and women in black and brown wool, leather, and fur, tripped stiffly between the banks of snow which, in the center, had a radiance of blue glass.

Arm in arm Arthur Hale and Emily Grover went to church together. They were engaged to be married, and she was there visiting his large family for the first time. He had no particular faith, but she was attached to the one in which she had been brought up; and they were taking refuge in that church from the constant attention and inconsequential embarrassment which resulted from her presence at home.

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They found a vacant pew at the back under the south window where the strong sunshine, falling upon their backs, would keep them in mind of the perfect weather outdoors, as purely bright and troubling as the relation which brought them there together. But the memorial windows somewhat spoiled the sunshine with their rainbows of raw color. The false rafters and the pews were newly varnished, the plaster newly painted and stenciled. There was a mixed fragrance of rubber galoshes, wet woollens, and house-plants which bordered the rostrum.

The pastor looked happy and progressive, but when he took his place in his armchair, followed on a sort of balcony above and behind him by the organist and the choir, he assumed a dolorous attitude with one hand over his brow. Then he came forward to the pulpit, ran his eyes over the satisfactory congregation, and lifted his very gentle voice in prayer.

"Now let us rise and sing hymn two hun-

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dred and thirty-six." Because Arthur had to lower his voice lest it attract too much attention among the breathy, inexact, longing voices, he noticed the dejection or weakness or mere poverty of temperament of the people around him. They were in large part mothers with children, old men and women, more often than not alone, spinsters in twos and threes; he looked in vain for a man of his age.

During the emphatic, sensible sermon he kept his eyes fixed on the girl he loved. She was a foundling, adopted by a virtuous man and his wife in a remote part of the state; and her large eyes had kept the humble and shining look, her lips the resolute sensibility, her voice the eagerness to please which those of orphans have. As a lawyer in the second year of practice he earned only a modest living, but as soon as some one could be found to take the country school she taught, they were going to be married. Her profile there at his left, tinged by the stained-glass sun-

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shine, no higher than his shoulder. . . The little nose was almost transparent at the tip. Upon the wilfulness of that little chin, as if upon a cornerstone, he could safely found a home full of children, and a tranquil life. The mauve-and-rose mouth, listlessly attentive. . .

Haunted not by the past but the future, so tired of having waited six months already, they were almost unhappy together. This merely showed, the thoughtful lover believed, how mighty and singular happiness would be when at last, at last, he should get enough of looking at her, and shut his eyes in her presence, when they should no longer have to make conversation, but instead their mouths should fall asleep, half open, tasting fragrance, full of warmth. . .

The alto and the soprano of the choir rose to sing an anthem. Girl-priests—perhaps he ought to have known them, but black caps and gowns took away their identity. They were tall and sober. One of them had an

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olive complexion with a bloom of rouge; the other's face was a face for the theatre, which would be lovelier the farther away you were, as long as it could be seen at all. Their voices, immature and sophisticated at once, touched the young man and made him blush; so he took Emily's black-gloved hand in his. The entire congregation rustled in the pews. An old man parted his lips a little and struck his teeth together, very softly. Everyone seemed ready to make a sacrifice of something.

During the anthem Arthur suddenly noticed that a table was spread below the pulpit. It was the morning of Holy Communion; if he had known that he might not have come. Some one's best linen falling to the floor; the Body and the Blood, plates of bread and trays of drink under fresh napkins. . .

If only he and Emily were out on the country roads which were probably lively with shaken sleigh-bells and shaggy horses steaming at the mouth—they could put their

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hands in heavy fur mittens on each other's knees.

Four middle-aged men awkwardly went down the aisle. The pastor removed the linen, blessed the spiritual nourishment, and sent them back to the congregation with it. A dead silence fell in the high, bare room. All the women took clean handkerchiefs out of their bodices and handbags. Silent prayers were offered—doubtless for the healing of sicknesses, the straightening of deformities, the breaking of bad habits, the return of wanderers.

The young man began to suffer secretly. Unwilling pity, unreasonable awe. Oh, that every prayer might be answered, every yearning appeased, so that one might be at peace with one's sweetheart—at peace with the yearning for one's sweetheart, if nothing more! But he was ashamed of this amorous selfishness.

The summer before he graduated from law school, taking his vacation in France

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with several friends, he had gone to Lourdes. A great sunny square in front of an ugly church. On two sides of it, at the back, in the shade, the families, their eyes full of tears; in front of them a regiment of wheel-chairs, and in front of the chairs, in the blazing sun, in beds on wheels, grotesque bodies that seemed to have been made of candle-drippings, a little bit alive, arms and legs wonderfully tied in sailors' knots, luminous heads like overturned pieces of sculpture with broken pedestals swathed in bedclothes. Hundreds of them, of all sorts. Mass was being sung in droning tones all around the square by powerful, unshaven priests. Others held their arms out straight from the shoulder in the attitude of being crucified or flying. Others went from sufferer to sufferer, pouring the holy water into tin cups from receptacles which looked like kerosene-oil cans.

(In the Wisconsin church the shoes of one of the men who were handing round the sac-

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rament creaked on the fiber rug. All their shoes carried moist tracks away from little puddles of melted snow.)

For the people in Lourdes there was only one thing to wish for—death. But the church had neglected to teach them how to wish to die. Everywhere rose instead a hopeless demand, rose like a gas, like a loud cry, like a soul more than life-size, let loose; a demand for a miracle of healing to come down, on wings, there in the middle of the square where the ground seemed to be heaving; so fierce a demand that the air palpitated with it and rang in one's ears—or perhaps that was an effect of the heat. Arthur had felt sick and gone off by himself under the great plane-trees, behind the crowd, to wait until his friends should have had enough.

That was a Catholic mystery; this was merely symbolical worship in a progressive Protestant church. That was visible need, mutilation, desperation; here it was invisible

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—not quite invisible, the difference was not great enough. Miracles were all alike—but had there been a miracle, would there be one? The minister had preached about the Holy Ghost's coming down at Pentecost; interpreted it lightly, hopefully, in terms of brotherly love, public spirit, and pacifism. The startled apostles around a table, the Dove with ruffled plumage in midair, in a nest of little flames—so it was in the pictures. Not caring how the pastor had explained it all, Arthur thought he understood what it meant.

Directly in front of him sat an old man; the nape of his neck sparkled a little with close-cropped hair. A vigorous old man, worn away to the bone by hard living; and he was shedding tears like a young girl, with the same gentle steadfastness.

Nothing could be done to prevent it, Arthur thought—his life must be going the way of the lives of all those around him. The way of the impermanence of joy and the reiteration of pain. So that the day would

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come inevitably when he too would be crippled in one sense or another, and lose little babies, and suffer odious disappointments; innumerable days of illness to be healed, deformity to be strengthened, bad habits to be broken, wanderers to be longed for; the day when Emily would die. Would he come here, then, following his neighbors, to the Lord's Table? Where divine grace did or did not come down. . .

Meanwhile the silver platters of rectangular crumbs, the trays of little purple tumblers, went up one row of pews and down another, doing their work, such as it was.

The dove that ought to come down. . . (The organist kept playing a series of roving, lamentable chords.) A bright beak, a swelling, palpitating throat, glowing wings, snowy and silky, wrinkled red feet with glassy claws—tearing the husk of disappointment off such satisfactions as there were, tearing the present away and leaving the future bare in one's arms (in the spring he and

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Emily could get married) breaking, in order to heal, the miserable body (his body left behind when Emily died). He turned his head so that his eyes could run up to the top of one of the windows where several panes stood open, hoping to see a pigeon, a sparrow, anything with wings—for good luck.

He remembered a thing that had happened when he was a small boy. He was lying on the lawn with his eyes almost closed, peeping at the clouds—he had asked his mother if the clouds were angels; she had laughed—and a rooster following a hen, not seeing him in the grass, ran over him. It leaped and gave a guttural squawk, flapped its wings, and scratched him with its feet. He had cried all that afternoon; he remembered and almost felt his terror.

The church was hot. He wished that he had not come away from his father's house. The nerves in his body seemed to be striving to pull apart; it was misery to sit still. Emily's face was entirely lacking in expres-

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sion; he supposed that if she lifted her rather bluish eyelids she would smile at him, seeing nothing of his trouble. Somewhere behind him a steam-radiator hissed softly like a sacred snake.

Vaguely he remembered having read something in college about the origin of this sacrament. Magic and the beginnings of religion... A priest by the fire, among the curls of his uncut beard moving his weathered lips, rolling his eyes. (In his armchair on the rostrum the pastor seemed to be saying a prayer for himself.) Chosen bulls and the finest of the flock led up. The handmade knife on the very soft throat. Thick jets of blood. Recitations by the priest. Smoke almost too heavy with fat to rise—that was food for the god. Brutal men falling upon the hot meat. Charred but still wet bones being quarrelled over. Angry panting, sighs of happy appetite. Uninvited guests at the meal of the god. The best cuts for the

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bravest. With the god's blessing. That was not what he was trying to remember.

The ugly stained-glass windows, discoloring Emily's cheeks, irritated him unreasonably. They ought to be broken, and the pieces sent away into the jungle for the missionaries to give to savage tribes.

There in Africa and the islands, other rites, fundamentally the same. All around in the dark beyond the camp fires the thick wreath of forest with, here and there, lionesses and leopards, by way of flowers in the wreath. Sleeping sickness, marauding beasts, undernourishment, leprosy—they need all the divine help they can get. The most aged of the men plays priest, a vigorous old man, by a hard life worn down to the gesticulating bones. (The nape of the neck of the old man in the pew ahead was strangely checkered by deep creases.) Drums in despair: the dead hide beaten, the bodies beaten, the earth beaten. Dance of old women, the older they are the keener the

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frenzy, the higher they leap. The feathers and dead leaves they wear limp with sweat, gray with kicked-up dust. And there is a feast at last. Eating the enemy, in order to usurp his magic and absorb his power. Eating the god. Eating the body of god—that was it, that was what, in his over-excited mind, among his college memories, Arthur was hunting for. What the sacrament meant . . .

He tried to think of the man, the Jew, the beloved of the whole world, who had instituted the particular feast at which he sat—"my Body and my Blood"—one man who was a god and did not need anything for himself, not even a miracle; but, for more than a moment, he could not.

The sacrament was going down the row of seats in front of him. The old man took his share, smiling through his extraordinary tears. His own turn would come soon. He could not take it. What would Emily think? She removed the black kid glove from her

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right hand. There it was. Emily put the morsel of crustless bread between her lips and took one of the fragrant cups; Arthur hated her having to. Then, feeling for one moment like a renegade, a foreigner, an impotent, he passed on the plate and the tray.

Emily looked up at him; she gave him a little smile, wistful and—oh, he could not be wrong, he knew every one of her smiles—proud. She was proud of him for having refused.

So the rest of the service passed quickly, in the reaction from his excitement and the joy of her smile. There was another hymn; there was a benediction. They were going out with all the congregation. Emily knew no one; he bowed now and then, but coldly, in order not to have to speak.

The noon sunshine, snowy and silky, fluttered and wheeled about like a flock of doves larger than any on earth, covering the whole town. Every bit of glass or polished metal in the automobiles and the windows hurt one's

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eyes and then made them feel refreshed. All the snow-banks were shrinking; the water froze again on the walks between them, so that they were like straight streams of glass on the edges of which trees threw down their shadows, dim chains and wiry crowns. Arthur asked, as they went down the street, "You didn't mind, did you, Emily, my not taking communion?"

Her lips already forming the word No, she merely smiled, hoping to hear his explanation.

"It's not just that I'm not religious. An ancient, terrible, important thing that is. Blasphemous to do it, without being willing to; I should almost have been afraid. Even if I were religious I don't think I should want such forms of worship. They seem like asking for what one hasn't any right to ask for, at least as long as one can get along without it."

"Ritual, I mean all the emotional parts of religion," Emily said, "are either a comfort

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or they hurt a great deal. Oh, religion can make one so unhappy when one is young!"

"But it doesn't make you unhappy . . ."

"Oh no. But it used to, long before I met you."

They were walking down the long, bright, shabby main street of the town. Little heaps of popcorn in a booth between two shops gave off an odor of harvest, butter, and heat, an odor which meant hunger not keen enough to be painful. Arthur wondered what his mother had prepared for them at home.

"Did I ever tell you how I got religion at a revival meeting?" Emily asked. "I must have been about thirteen; I know I had just begun to grow tall and was often a little sick. My foster-father is very devout, a sort of mystic. He was especially strict with me on account of my origin—he seemed to think my real parents had not been very religious, nor even moral, perhaps."

She smiled up at her lover's frowning face. "Well, one day a revivalist came to our town

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—I've forgotten his name, but one of the famous ones. He brought his own quartet and hired the Opera House for three nights; all the Protestant churches combined to finance it. My foster-mother thought I was too young, but my foster-father insisted on my going. The Opera House was the hall where they had moving pictures and dances and two or three singers and entertainers every winter. I had never been inside it, though when I had to go to the dentist I used to peak through the keyhole. At first I was disappointed; it was a big sad place like two or three empty barns thrown together, and had a strange smell. But I soon forgot where I was; I had never been so excited in church.

"He called himself the Soul-getter. He had a rich pleading voice, but sometimes it grew harsh, filling the hall, thundering, making quite grown people feel as little babies must when they are scolded. His sermon was very long and very wonderful, everyone

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thought so; about how badly people were behaving in recent years, about moving pictures, about drinking, immodest dresses, and dancing, and what these things led to. I didn't understand it all, but listened eagerly; I did not dare look at my foster-mother, for I felt sure that she would disapprove of my hearing such things discussed. Not a great deal about hell fire, but some; and at the end he talked of Christ's crucifixion for us, and how horrible it was not to take advantage of it.

"Then he sat down to rest, and the quartet took his place. I had never heard such beautiful singing, mournful and complicated, and it made me have a lump in my throat.

"As soon as they finished he leaped to his feet again and called for the grace of God to enter people's hearts and implored every sinner, every disbeliever, every sufferer, to come down to the front and be saved. Not from hell—he didn't say anything about that during this part of the service—but from

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sorrow, remorse, loneliness, disease, shame, and such things. How we would do wrong without meaning to; how those we loved would die, and no one but the Lord to comfort us; how having no faith was like an awful sickness; how life was all suffering; how we are pitiful and ignorant. He would talk like this for a while; then suddenly he would shout, 'You must be saved! You must be saved! Come to the feet of the Lord!' The blood of the Lamb, shed for you! Come down to the front! Come all ye!'—repeating everything over and over. He waved his fists and rocked back and forth as if he were beating time to what he said. First at the top of his voice and then in a whisper; sometimes it seemed as if he were going to break down."

"I think . . ." Arthur began; but Emily would not be interrupted.

"At first I was frightened and wanted to run out, but of course I couldn't. My foster-father was sitting between me and my foster-

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mother. I was only thirteen and young for that age. I dreaded growing up, anyway, because my foster-parents were old and I would be alone in the world, which I thought would be like another Orphans' Home, even larger and even more badly run. I began to think of my real parents and how they had left me at that orphanage, where the punishments were so severe; and I had never seen them and perhaps they weren't living. Please understand, Arthur; no religious feelings, not one, but the most frightful emotion. I hadn't felt anything like it since the days in the Home when I used to get so tired, doing what the matrons made us do, that I would throw myself on the floor, whimpering and kicking. Meanwhile a great many people did go down, some crying, some repeating the speaker's phrases. He came down off the platform and met them, and helped them kneel down, not ceasing to speak. It went on and on."

Arthur looked as solemn as if she had made

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him angry. "I think," he said, "I believe—that the most important virtue, the thing we need most and ought to learn how to develop—is stoicism."

"But that is not the end of my story," Emily said. "Suddenly I burst into tears; I could not help it. My foster-father turned toward me and whispered, 'It is the grace of God.' I cried all the harder. Then he spoke out loud. 'The grace has come into your heart. Suffer the little ones to come unto Me. Don't cry. Come up to the front. My little daughter, come with me.' What could I do, how could I tell what was the matter? People were turning around to look at me. He led me up the aisle and made me kneel with the rest. He held my hand. I could not stop crying. The revivalist pitied me and patted my head."

They had walked from one end of the main street to the other. It looked very gay, though nothing had been meant to be beautiful. Behind the plate glass of the closed de-

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partment stores brightly dressed manikins struck attitudes, up to their knees in great leaves of frost. Other windows were softly white with steam, and one might have said that these were weeping. The drug stores had put out their racks of magazines which resembled old-fashioned flower-stands, with the faces of film stars for flowers. The sky let fall its blue and white on the banks of snow and the painted buildings and the sweethearts who now walked in silence, very soberly, though there was the gaiety of wreaths left from Christmas for their eyes, the cheerfulness of several shouted greetings for their ears.

Upon Emily's face shone without question a faint smile, the faint certitude of love; but she seemed to have grown tired as she had told her story. Her shoulders had straightened as if she had taken upon them something heavy. Now Arthur felt the dependent pressure of her arm in his, and saw that her feet were unsteady; only the feet of a

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strong young woman going toward her lover's home—but they were like the feet of a soul moving, with a certain fortitude but dubiously, amid religious mysteries, fears, and abrupt visions, a great distance from any other footsteps since in that realm, however much love may do, no two human beings can agree.

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